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DECEMBER 14 1978

Dear Senator Helms:

The Secretary has asked me to thank you for your letter of November 30 requesting information about the United States response to the Guyana tragedy. I note that you wrote an identical letter to the Secretary of Defense, which has been referred to the State Department for reply. As you know, the United States Government continues to be involved in this tragic episode and is investigating various aspects of the situation. Nevertheless, I wanted to give you an early response to the questions you have raised concerning this unprecedented matter.

On Sunday, November 19, it had become clear that the United States Government was facing a major crisis in Guyana. An American Congressman and other Americans in his party had been killed. A settlement believed to include over 1,000 Americans was involved, and its situation was uncertain. It was apparent that the Government of Guyana required assistance in handling a major emergency created by the presence of Americans within its borders.

The President, acting under his constitutional authority as Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, ordered the departments of our government to take action to deal with this emergency. The operational decisions within the United States Government in this unique situation were made by the Secretary of State in conjunction with some of his Cabinet colleagues.

Under the President's Executive authorities, medical evacuation for injured Americans was immediately ordered,

The Honorable
Jesse Helms,
United States Senate.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
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and the United States Government offered assistance to the Government of Guyana to prevent further loss of life. As events progressed, it became clear that there were large numbers of Americans dead. For a time, it was believed that there were survivors in the jungle; and the United States adjusted and increased its assistance to help the search by Guyana police and military. Finally, when the full scope of the tragedy of Jonestown was clear, our Government was requested by the Government of Guyana to remove the bodies. This peration was considered essential in handling the emergency situation which existed in Guyana at the time.

The federal government does not, of course, pay the expense of bringing back the remains of Americans who died abroad. That is a responsibility of their families or, if no next of kin can be found, the country where the death occurred is responsible for burial. It was evident, however, that it was beyond the ability of individual families or of the facilities available in Guyana to resolve the unprecedented problems that characterized this situation. In fact it was not even clear who the ext of kin were without identification being establi ed. The families of those who died at Jonestown are, of course, expected to bear the responsibility for the disposition of the remains in the United States. We do not consider the Jonestown case to be a precedent.

The Justice Department is fully exploring possible legal remedies which can be used to recover the cost the U.S. Government has incurred in removing and processing the bodies of Americans from Guyana. Now that the eme ency is substantially over, the Office of Management and udget and other agencies are reviewing the various operations to determine the exact cost to the United States Government. Although the costs to the United States Government of an effort of this magnitude obviously are considerable, they are substantially less than the $8 million figure used in some press reports. Please be assured that we will report fully to appropriate congressional committees on these aspects of the operation upon completion of our review. Meanwhile, the Justice Department will make all efforts to recover the costs to the United States Government.

If you have any further questions, you may wish to contact Deputy Assistant Secretary John Bushnell. His telephone is 632-8562.

Sincerely,

(S)

Douglas J. Bennet, Jr.
Assistant Secretary
for Congressional Relations

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— LOU — NODIS
— C — CODEWORD
— S
— TS

LOG NO: 1182 C
S/S NO: 7823170
OTHER NO:
RECD: 12/5/78

FROM: Sen. Jesse Helms TO: The Secy DATE: 11/30/78

SUBJECT: Letter requesting information re recent events in Rhodesia

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